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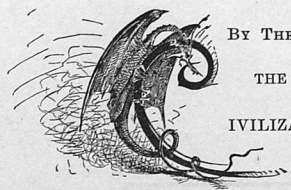
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## FRENCH HOUSE FURNISHING.

BY THEODORE CHILD.

## THE FIREPLACE.



CIVILIZATION is not such a glorious development as stump orators and mis-

sionaries would have us believe, nor is progress an unmixed blessing. Still, when we think of the sufferings of our forefathers during the winter in the old days, we must congratulate ourselves on having been born in the days of more or less perfected heating apparatus. Even in sunny Italy where life seems one long and luminous dream, the winters were not without very material worries, for we hear that towards the end of his life Raphael spent much time in attempting to prevent the chimneys of the Duc d'Este from smoking out their noble master like a vulgar fox.\*

Benjamin Franklin rendered the same service to the French at the end of the last century and invented a chimney which occupied the attention of the pamphleteers.† And certainly to judge from the writings and the anecdotic history of the past the French needed some help. The immense open chimneys of the fifteenth century simply roasted people on one side while the furious draught they created froze them on the other.

Two centuries later we may imagine how poorly even the court was lodged from the fact that the Duchess of Orleans writes from Versailles March 16, 1695: "It is so cold here that at the king's table the wine and the water froze in the glasses." Mme. de Sévigné, in her beautiful hotel Cornavalet at Paris, complains in January, 1659, that her ink was a block of ice. Saint Simon, in 1709, gives an account of a supper in the Duc de Villeroi's bedroom when the bottles were frozen, and the same year the courts of justice were closed for a period because the judge and counselors could not endure the cold. In 1729 the cold caused Parliament to be suspended and all the playhouses closed for five days.

M. Henry Havard has suggested an ingenious theory that the great ladies of the eighteenth century invented the fashion of receiving in bed on account of the coldness of their drawing-rooms. At any rate the memoirs of the time are full of curious details on this subject. Thus, for instance, in the reign of Louis XV., the *maréchale* de Luxembourg used to pass her winters in a Sedan chair placed at the fireside, an idea which she doubtless borrowed from the doctor de Lorme, who is mentioned by Tallemant des Réaux, as having prolonged his life to the space of one hundred years, thanks to this and other precautions. So too Madame de Maintenon had a cosy corner, *une niche*, in her apartments at Versailles, while Mme. du Deffand, less coquettish, used to sit through the winter with her legs in a sort of barrel.

Alas! Mesdames de Lafayette, de Sévigné, de Montespan and almost all the famous ladies of the eighteenth century were martyrs to rheumatism, and the splendid salons of the epoch, so symmetrical, so graceful in contour and detail, so luxuriously artistic in their furniture and decoration, were comfortless except in summer.

Old Sébastien Mercier at the end of the century in his *Tableaux de Paris* scoffs at the poor grand seigneurs in their gorgeous mansions because they have to wrap themselves up in bear skins and blow upon their fingers unless they prefer to be suffocated with smoke.

The modern means of heating houses and other buildings are very numerous; steam, hot air, stoves, gas and open fires. But in France, as in our Anglo-Saxon countries, the open fire prevails in spite of everything, because it is the most hygienic and the gayest means, and because it allows us to see the flames and to give ourselves one of the greatest satisfactions in life, namely that of poking the fire.

In the best Parisian houses, both private and tenement dwellings, the whole building is generally heated by a calorifère or hot air stoves placed in the basement, and the fireplaces are retained rather as objects of luxury and also as objects of art too. The fireplace, the hearth, the *foyer*, is the center of family life, there is something sacred in the very fire itself, and in our northern climate where we need artificial warmth six months out of the twelve, the fireplace is not only the center of family life and of hospitality, but it is also the place of honor in the house and the place where

we pass a great part of our lives, if not the happiest. The fireplace is therefore worthy of all the decorator's attention.

Happily in modern France, Berlin black register stoves are almost unknown. That horrible semicircular aperture, looking not unlike the entrance of a tunnel and decorated according to the dignity of the room with steel, brass, or ormolu; the black sheet iron fender surrounded by a rail of burnished steel bent into ungraceful curves of no particular pattern or meaning, too low for protection, too elegant to be touched by chilly feet, for each touch leaves a scratch on the polished steel; the massive burnished steel fire irons bristling with traps for pinching unwary fingers, those fire irons which are constantly slipping with a bang and a clatter into the resonant iron fender, all these showy abominations are unknown in France. The native combustible of the country is wood and the fireplaces are constructed for the burning of wood.

As might be expected in this eclectic age we find in the Parisian houses reproductions and adaptations of all the models of the past in the way of fireplaces. Some admirers of the fifteenth century build themselves monumental open fireplaces provided with huge *landiers* or andirons; others delight in the architectural chimney-pieces of the Renaissance, and others in the wooden mantelpieces of the Flemish and Dutch. Modern ornamental iron work as applied to hearth furniture, is entirely in the mediæval style and will have to be treated in a special article.

But for models of the characteristic French chimney-piece we shall have to go back to the eighteenth century to the models of Le Roux, La Londe and Blondel; its elements are simply a rectangular opening in the wall framed with side posts and lintel and surmounted by a shelf or by fixed decoration which is continued in some way in the panel above and worked in with the general system of the fixed decoration of the room.

Take, for instance, the chimney of the Hotel de Villars in the Louis XV. style; the chimney-piece is of marble, relieved by gilt bronze scrolls and flowers, and the pilasters terminate in caryatids supporting bronze candelabra, harmonizing in design with the wonderfully carved frame of the looking-glass, which is surmounted by the arms of the Villars family and by a painted trumeau representing Apollo.

Sometimes the looking-glass is replaced by a painted panel, which is likewise surmounted by a trumeau forming part of the general decoration of the room, and sometimes—but rarely and only in exceptionally large rooms—the chimney-piece forms a monumental whole and occupied the wall from floor to ceiling with its caryatids, its bas-reliefs, and its architectural details. But, speaking generally, the French chimney-piece as constructed by the architect requires a certain amount of movable decoration.

The mantel shelf first of all is bare. What is to be put on it? Tradition replies, a clock between two vases, two bronzes or two candelabra, and in the parade rooms at Versailles, in the monumental chimney-pieces, the architects left a hole for a "monument" by Lepante or Leroy, so inseparable did the chimney-piece and the clock seem to these artists. Now-a-days, too, the mantel-shelf is still considered to be the right place for the clock, and certainly, if one possesses a clock which is an object of art, I cannot imagine a better place.

Objections however have been made, and that inveterate old grumbler, Sébastien Mercier, already complained at the end of the last century of the generalization of "this lugubrious fashion." "There is nothing more sad to contemplate," he writes in his *Tableau de Paris*, "than a clock. It shows you your life slipping away, so to speak, and the pendulum warns you that your moments are counted and that those which are passing will never return."

Charles Blanc in his *Grammar of the Decorative Arts* has re-edited this theory and suggests that it is preferable to put the clock on a bracket or on a corner table or in a box, where you can go and look at it when you absolutely desire to know the hour. I give old Mercier's idea and Charles Blanc's corroboration for what they are worth. For my own part I am the happy possessor of an eighteenth century clock, whose graceful and delicate ornamentation drives away all sad thoughts whenever I look at it, and I shall certainly never relegate it to a corner table or put it away in a box.

I have described the French chimney-pieces as being usually made of marble. It is true that many delicately carved wooden chimney-pieces were made in the eighteenth century, but these were for very modest interiors; the finest were of marble or stone, which is decidedly the proper substance for the purpose. Prudence recommends

and good sense exacts the use of incombustible materials in the construction of the hearth.

The clean contours of marble and its sharp profiles form an excellent frame for the fire and limit it exactly, while its brilliant polished surface harmonizes with the flame. In most French tenement houses the chimney-pieces will be found to be of white marble, for the simple reason that an architect who is designing a room for general occupation and for all kinds of unknown furniture, must choose some plain marble without accentuated character and of a nature to harmonize with all ordinary shades of wall coverings.

But the man who is free to arrange his home according to his own fancy will choose a colored marble of a rich and brilliant tone, which will set off his furniture to advantage. Only the richer and more highly colored the marble the simpler must be the design of the chimney-piece. Fine sculpture, flowers, garlands, delicate friezes and cartouches appear to no advantage when carved in colored marble. In such a material the sculptor must content himself with the simple architectonic profiles and with rich and powerful moldings, or if something richer is desired, recourse must be had to applications of gilt bronze, which appears so finely against a background of turquoise blue, red or violet *brèche* marble. Terminal figures and caryatids of ordinary bronze may also be worked into the architecture of chimney-piece.

But it is well to bear in mind that the French artists of the eighteenth century have proved by many brilliant examples that marble and bronze sympathize perfectly and harmonize with furniture. Nothing can be richer and more magnificent than a colored marble vase mounted in gilt bronze or a rare marble slab on the top of a console or commode.

In any case, whether the marble of the chimney-piece be white or colored, fine bronzes, the delicate porcelain of Sévres and Saxe, and the terra cottas of Clodion and Falconet show admirably on this surface. I mention these two great names merely for the sake of the note of color; unfortunately for the world the works of these two great artists are high rarities.

As regards the looking-glasses, it is well to remember that the glass simulates an opening in the wall and for the sake of satisfying the eye it needs to be framed solidly and ought not to be carried right up to the ceiling, in the first place because it might thus appear to compromise the solidity of the ceiling by not leaving a sufficient visible support, and secondly because generally up at the top of the room there is nothing very interesting for the glass to reflect.

This rule, or this principle, if it may be so called, was always observed by the architects of the eighteenth century who invariably surmounted the glass by a trumeau, either a framed and painted panel or a panel of carved wood.

Very often in French houses you find the chimney-piece surmounted by a sheet of transparent glass forming a window. This is a charming idea and nothing can be more agreeable than to sit at the fireside and to see, beyond and between the elegant silhouettes of the objects of art on the mantel shelf, the perspective of trees and garden and country fading away into the distance.

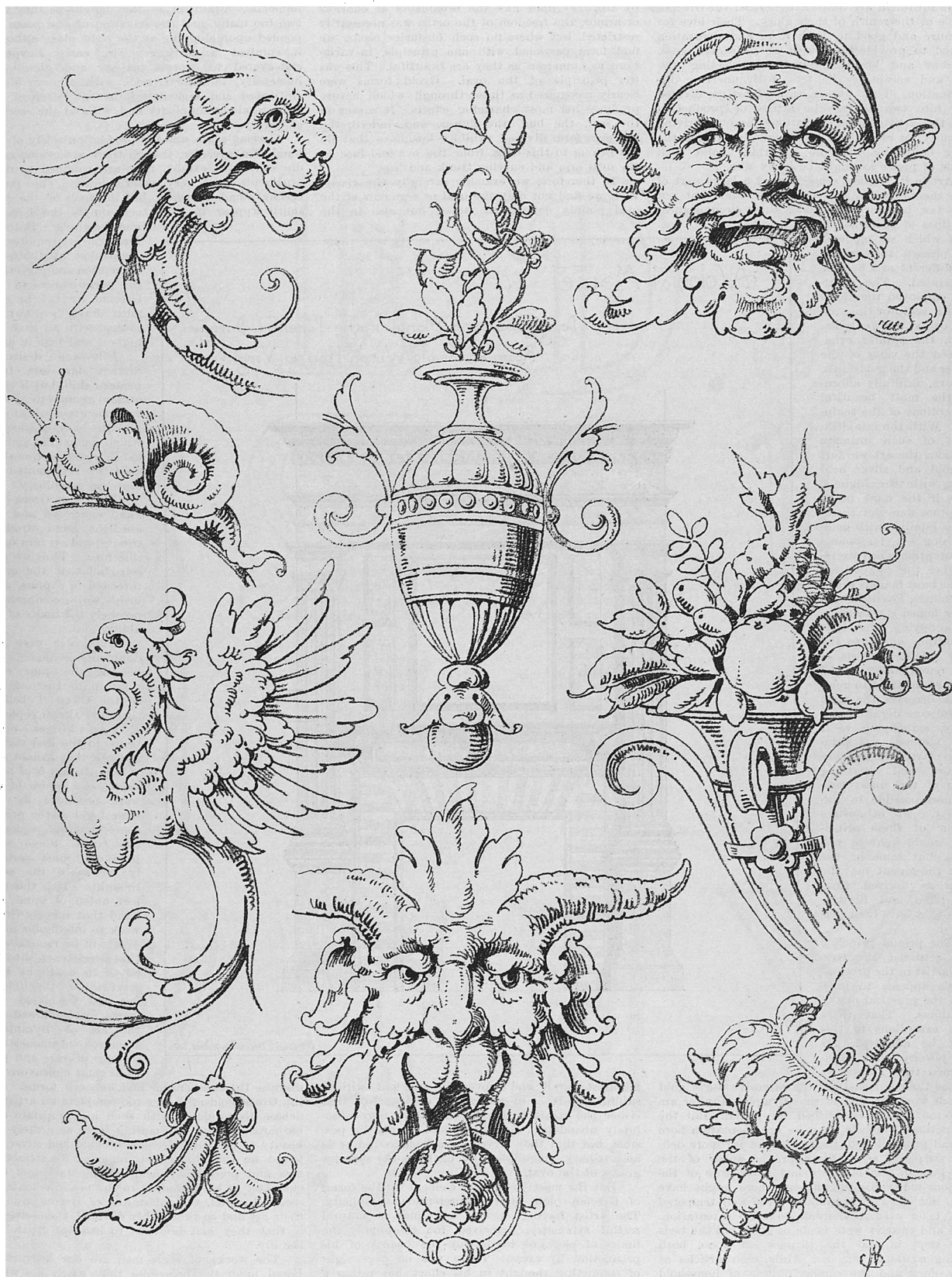
There remains now to be considered the decoration of the fireplace itself. The tenant on taking possession of a French house finds simply an oblong opening framed with the chimney-piece and capable of being closed by a sheet iron trap or curtain.

In order to build his fire he has to place his fire dogs on the hearth. These *chenets*, *frux*, or andirons, and all the utensils for holding, handling and guarding the fire have been from the earliest times the object of the attention of metallurgic artists. The Pompeian bronze brasiers are often works of art; the wrought iron *landiers* of the middle ages are extremely beautiful specimens of iron work; the Renaissance *chenets* which took their place, consist generally of a base adorned with consoles, volutes, and a mascarons, which serves as a pedestal for a statuette of medium dimensions, a Venus, a Pluto, an Apollo, or some other mythological hero.

The Renaissance artists put some of their best genius into figures for *chenets*, and many of these statuettes, separated from their basements, occupy places of honor among the bronzes in the European museums. Doubtless it is not artistically correct to employ the human figure in decorative compositions which, like andirons, are destined to be seen from above, and in this respect we shall do better to imitate the French artists of the eighteenth century, who used rather animals, chimeric creations, and purely decorative motifs, in the composition of *chenets*. A form of composition that has been recently revived, and has by its pleasing effect become widely popular.

\* Eugene Muntz, *Raphael, sa vie*, etc. Paris, 1881, p. 620.

† La Cheminée économique à laquelle on a appliqué le mécanisme de M. Franklin. Paris, 1786.



A PAGE OF SUGGESTIONS FOR DECORATORS.